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ABSTRACT

Seven schools that have re-evaluated their needs for standardized college admissions examinations were studied to explore their admissions and innovative testing policies. The schools include: (1) Bates College in Lewiston, Maine; (2) Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine; (3) Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration in Cambridge, Massachusetts; (4) Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, Maryland; (5) Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge; (6) Middlebury College in Vermont; and (7) Union College in Schenectady, New York. Each school has moved away from reliance on standardized tests; the reaction in all has been overwhelmingly positive. Adjusting testing policies at these institutions was intended to reduce test panic and test preparation time, lessen students' fears about their own achievements, and help eliminate cultural and gender biases. Schools in this study evaluated tests for their relevance and found alternatives to heavy reliance on the Scholastic Aptitude Test, the Graduate Management Admissions Test, and the Medical Colleges Admissions Test. (SLD)

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Admissions Alternatives That Work

by
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with
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BEYOND STANDARDIZED TESTING

Preface

SAT, ACT, GMAT, MCAT: These are the letters that haunt the dreams of millions of students across the country. Each year, millions of dollars and uncountable hours of anxiety are spent on these admissions exams by students hoping to beat the tests, raise their scores and gain admission to the college or university of their choice. Most of these students do not know that they have any alternatives to the mad pursuit of higher test scores. They buy test review books, take test preparation courses, memorize analogies and learn the "tricks" to the tests: and they believe that this is all part of the process of applying to schools.

Many colleges and universities are also trapped by the testing system. Despite research revealing that the tests are unfair, measure irrelevant knowledge and provide redundant information,[1] admissions officers feel great pressure to continue to require the tests. As former E.T.S. researcher Rodney T. Hartnett explains, "... at a large number of institutions, requiring SAT scores for admissions doesn't make sense at all." They "require the test scores to maintain an aura of selectivity." [2]

In recent years, however, a striking trend has emerged.

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[1] Allan Nairn and Associates, The Reign of ETS. The Ralph Nader Report on the Educational Testing Service. 1980.

[2] David Owen, None of the Above, Houghton-Mifflin, 1985 pp. 231-2.

Many colleges and universities have begun to reevaluate their need for these exams. Some have even stopped requiring tests like the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), the American College Testing Program Assessment Test (ACT), the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) and the Medical Colleges Admissions Test (MCAT). Students and admissions departments, as well as parents, teachers and guidance counselors, are becoming aware that a large number of institutions never required applicants to submit test scores in the first place. (See Appendix A.)

This study reports the results of research and of interviews with admissions officials and researchers at seven institutions which have re-evaluated their need for the tests. Bates College, Bowdoin College, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Middlebury College and Union College all have conducted independent analyses of the value of standardized admissions tests. As a result of their research, all have altered their use of the tests. Our examination of these seven schools reveals much about the concerns of the admissions community and about the success of the innovative testing policies at schools which have implemented them.

Changes at seven schools

The changes that schools have made in their use of standardized tests cover a full range of options and create a new

set of alternatives for applicants:

-- The Harvard Business School no longer considers an applicant's GMAT test scores, even if it receives them.

-- Bowdoin College has made SAT and ACT submission entirely optional.

-- Applicants to Johns Hopkins Medical School may submit either SAT, GRE or ACT scores in place of MCAT scores.

-- At Bates and Union Colleges, submission of SAT scores is no longer required. Applicants must, however, send the results of either three achievement tests or the ACT.

-- Middlebury College allows applicants to submit either an ACT, or five achievement tests, or an SAT report and three achievement tests.

-- The Massachusetts Institute of Technology counters the gender bias of the test by weighing SAT scores differently for males and females.

In addition to those schools, there are many selective colleges and universities, like Hampshire College, which never required such tests and which survive happily without them.

Reactions to the changes

All of these schools report that the reaction to these changes is overwhelmingly positive. Students, faculty, alumni and admissions staffs all praise the new and innovative use of tests. Each year Bowdoin's admissions staff polls their accepted applicants; they have found that approximately 98% of those

students responding approve strongly of the optional test policy. [3] William Mason, the Director of Admissions at Bowdoin, says that faculty and alumni also value highly the new policy as reflecting Bowdoin's commitment to individualism. [4]

Dr. Norman Anderson, Assistant Dean of Admissions for the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, said that his office received hundreds of calls and letters praising their decision and only two negative letters. "We stopped counting after 800 positive calls!" [5] Similarly, alumni at The Harvard Business School were very supportive of their institution's decision to completely drop the GMAT. As Harvard's John Lynch explained, "Our alumni, with their knowledge of what is important in a general manager, understood that the test scores were not helpful to us." [6] The only strongly negative reaction came from the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business, the agency that certifies business schools. Harvard was pressured by this group to continue to require the exam. [7]

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[3] William Mason, Director of Admissions, Bowdoin College. Telephone interview on August 3, 1987.

[4] Ibid

[5] Dr. Norman Anderson, Johns Hopkins University. Telephone interview on July 20, 1987.

[6] John Lynch, former Director of MBA Admissions at The Harvard Business School. Interview at The Harvard Business School on July 1, 1987.

[7] Lynch, ibid.

Expanding the applicant pool

The schools that have adjusted their use of the tests found that innovative approaches are often better suited to the needs of their institutions. Fears of frightening away potential applicants proved unfounded. In fact, freshman applications have increased by 40% at Bates since the 1984 decision. [8] At Bowdoin too, the number of applicants jumped dramatically after their decision to stop requiring SAT scores. [9] In his article on Bowdoin's experience, Paul Schaffner addresses the concern that dropping the testing requirement would lower the quality of the applicant pool. He found that roughly the same number of students submitting their SAT scores applied as before. [10] In addition, Bowdoin received applications from another group of students, those who withheld their SAT scores. Schaffner shows that the optional SAT admissions policy attracted new pools of applicants to Bowdoin. These new applicants were drawn by Bowdoin's innovative testing policy. Schaffner concludes that his results "suggest that the policy had the effect of expanding the applicant pool rather than simply substituting candidates with lower SAT scores for candidates with higher scores." [11]

Bowdoin's experience is not surprising. The admissions

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[8] Tim Spofford, "A test flunks out," Albany Times-Union, March 20, 1987.

[9] Paul E. Schaffner, Journal of Higher Education, Vol. 56, No 1 (January/February 1985), p. 59.

[10] Ibid

[11] Ibid, p. 70.

officials at Johns Hopkins also expressed pleasure at receiving applications from non-traditional medical school candidates like "Peace Corps types" after they stopped requiring the MCAT. [12] In fact, even at those colleges which still require the SAT, most admissions directors do not view the scores as important. Sixty-two percent of college admissions directors surveyed said that "the absence of [SAT or ACT] scores would have made little or no difference in either the size or the composition of the class." [13]

"We've created a monster!"

There is wide-spread concern among college and university officials that overuse of standardized tests is warping the higher education admissions process, high school curricula and even the students' sense of their own abilities. Michael Behnke, Director of Admissions at M.I.T., expressed some typical concerns: "We worry about people defining their worth and potential in terms of test scores. This is especially troubling because of race and gender differences in scores. We worry about the growing industry of test coaching schools feeding off of people's anxieties." [14]

There is also real concern that requiring the tests

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[12] Anderson, Johns Hopkins University. Op. cit.

[13] Ernest L. Boyer, College: The Undergraduate Experience in America, Harper & Row, p. 34.

[14] Michael C. Behnke, Testimony to the U.S. House Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights, April 23, 1987.

exaggerates their importance in the eyes of applicants and those advising them. William Mason says that in 1969, when Bowdoin was considering dropping its testing requirement, it was in large part motivated by the faculty's concern that using test scores as a major part of the decision making process "misrepresented the very nature of college admissions." [15] High school curricula have been distorted so as to better prepare students to take the SAT and ACT. [16] Some colleges now offer test preparatory courses for undergraduate course credit because they want their students to score well on graduate school admissions tests. Speaking of the expense and anxiety that students subject themselves to, Ken Nourse, an admissions officer at Union College, said "For some, we have created a monster!" [17]

Calming the testing panic

By adjusting their testing requirements, these institutions are trying to calm the testing panic that has gripped so many parents and students. But they are doing more than making a statement. At the same, time they are reaching out to new groups of potential applicants who have been spending their time on activities other than test preparation. The statement that Bowdoin's Committee on Admissions and Student Aid issued to the

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15 William Mason, Bowdoin College. Op. cit.

16 C.f. National Center on Effective Secondary Schools Newsletter. School of Education, University of Wisconsin - Madison, volume 2, no. 2, Fall 1987.

17 Ken Nourse, Union College. Interview July 27, 1987.

faculty, announcing their decision to stop requiring all standardized tests, expressed this dual purpose well. It stated clearly that Bowdoin was dropping its test requirements both in an attempt to convince the public, including "a majority of high schools counselors and parents," that test scores are not emphasized in Bowdoin's admissions process, and also to attract applications from "more highly-motivated-but-low-scoring students." [18]

Preparing for admissions tests now takes up the time that students might spend on activities and pursuits which are both more interesting and more valuable. At Johns Hopkins, Dr. Anderson said that a major reason for the medical school's decision to drop the MCAT requirement was the admissions staff's belief that "the MCAT's were exerting too strong a pressure on undergraduates. We were concerned that the tests were displacing the learning process." [19] Terry Weiner Reynolds, Associate Dean of the Faculty at Union College said students "should be spending time on Dickens and Shakespeare, not preparing for the SAT." [20] Harvard Business School's Lynch expressed a similar concern when he spoke of students who score in the 90th percentile the first time they take the GMAT but who take the test again and again in

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[18] Bowdoin College, Committee on Admissions and Student Aid, October 7, 1987.

[19] Anderson, Johns Hopkins University. Op. cit.

[20] "A Rejection Slip for the SAT," Newsweek, April 27, 1987.

their attempts to raise their scores still higher. [21] Harvard Business School wanted to send a strong message to its applicants: spend more time and energy getting actual business experience. [22] The consistent theme expressed here by representatives of three very different schools is that standardized test scores are not omnipotent in their admissions decisions. There are very important qualities which these schools value and emphasize that are not reflected in test scores no matter how high.

Students underrate themselves

College officials also were concerned about how the tests affect students' aspirations. In his book, College: The Undergraduate Experience in America, Ernest Boyer describes the fear and self-doubt produced by the students' interpretations of their own and their peers' scores.

> We found, for example, that if a student, after completing a national examination, feels that the test scores are "too low," as many of them do, he or she is inclined to "apply down." A student discouraged by test scores may decide **not** to go to a preferred college **or he or she may give up on college altogether.** [23] (First emphasis in original, second added.)

Boyer notes that 62% of high school students do not apply to

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21 John Lynch, Harvard University. Op. cit.

22 Ibid

23 Boyer. Op. cit., pp. 34-35.

their first choice college because they think that their test scores are too low. [24]

This worries college officials who fear that talented high school students with high grades but low test scores are not applying to institutions where they could thrive. Admissions officers also worry that many students take the median scores, listed in college profiles, as floor scores. Caught up in their anxiety, applicants do not realize that the median represents a mid-point in a range of scores. This sort of downward self-selection of colleges is most likely to affect low-scoring students but there are high-scorers who fall into this trap also. In order to combat such misinterpretation of test scores, M.I.T. does not publish its median test scores. Rather in their profiles of entering classes, they offer a detailed presentation of the matriculating students' range of test scores, as well as the range of scores of the applicants and of the admitted students.

Concerns about test preparation

The effect of coaching on test performance is another issue which troubles many admissions staffs. Schools are worried that test preparation courses enable students to raise their scores and thus present a false assessment of their aptitude to the admissions department. Some colleges and universities also are concerned that the advantage that coaching offers to richer

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[24] Ibid

applicants makes it more difficult for institutions to assess the comparative qualifications of students of differing economic status. William C. Hiss, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at Bates, said "there has been an explosion of coaching schools, but enrollment is almost entirely stratified along financial lines. We have real problems using something that can be so biased by economic resources. It's just not fair to minority, blue-collar and rural students." [25]

Cultural bias

Educators also have been concerned about accusations of test biases. Research conducted at M.I.T. and Union confirms such accusations. Test biases against minority applicants present a serious problem for schools that hope to assess fairly and accurately applicants of all races. When Union made public its rationale for changing its testing requirements, college president John S. Morris asserted that "the SAT cannot escape cultural bias." [26] A sampling of the SAT questions that demonstrate cultural bias can be found in Appendix B. In examining these test items, it becomes apparent that parts of the SAT will be easier for students who are familiar with the activities of upper-middle class Americans. Inner city and poorer students cannot hope to do as well as their suburban and

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[25] Edward B. Fiske, "Some Colleges Question Usefulness of SAT's," New York Times, October 9, 1984.

[26] Tim Spofford, Albany Times-Union, March 20, 1987.

wealthier peers when faced with such questions. These tests are alleged to predict academic performance, but biases in the tests necessarily inhibit their accuracy as predictors.

Gender bias

The gap between the sexes on the SAT is another indication of inaccurate prediction. Although women earn higher grades than men in both high school and college, last year men scored, on average, 61 points higher on the SAT than women did. [27] If the SAT predicted equally well for men and women, the gap would reflect women's superior grade point averages and would favor women by 20 points, rather than men by 61. [28]

Researchers at M.I.T. investigated the gender gap at their own institution. They found that SAT scores underpredictrd women's performance at M.I.T., even when they controlled for the courses students took. The college academic records of women at M.I.T. are consistently better than their SAT scores predicted. In April of 1987, Behnke testified that M.I.T.'s academic prediction formula "underpredicts the final G.P.A. for women at all levels." [29] In response to this discovery, M.I.T. has introduced a new method of SAT interpretation to their admissions

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[27] Admissions Testing Program of the College Board, National Report College-Bound Seniors, 1986.

[28] Phyllis Rosser, Sex Bias in College Admissions Tests: Why Women Lose Out, A FairTest Report, p.3.

[29] Michael C. Behnke. Op. cit.

process. Their new procedure takes into account the gender bias of the tests when evaluating female applicants.

Conclusion

Schools often use standardized tests unquestioningly. In determining the utility of the tests, they rely on the conclusions of studies conducted by the test publishers or organizations that derive much of their income from student test fees. But these institutions have an obvious interest in legitimizing and perpetuating testing. We cannot assume that their studies are impartial. Universities have little motivation to examine the tests themselves because they are not charged for their use of the tests. However, given the present understanding of the biases and flaws of standardized tests, it is irresponsible for any institution to continue to use such tools blindly.

Unless colleges and universities conduct their own studies proving that the tests are of use to them, they have a responsibility to drop the tests. The schools cited in this study have taken the initiative to examine the tests and to find alternatives to heavy reliance on testing. Some of them have dared to move away from the tests entirely. Their experiences demonstrate that there are alternatives to the SAT, the GMAT, and the MCAT: **there are alternatives to standardized tests.**

APPENDIX A

Colleges and universities that do not require SAT, ACT, or where appropriate, GMAT or MCAT test scores for admission. (Partial listing.)

UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTIONS

University of Alaska: Juneau, AK
Antioch College: Yellow Springs, OH
Armstrong University: Berkeley, CA
Bard College: Annandale-on-Hudson, NY
Bates College: Lewiston, ME
Blue Mountain College: Blue Mountain, MS
Bowdoin College: Brunswick, ME
Bradford College: Bradford, MA
CUNY - Brooklyn College: Brooklyn, NY
CUNY - City Technical College: Brooklyn, NY
Cleary College: Ypsilanti, MI
College of the Atlantic: Bar Harbor, ME
College of Great Falls: Great Falls, MT
Columbia College: Chicago, IL
Cogswell Polytechnical College: Cupertino, CA
Davis & Elkins College: Elkins, WV
University of the District of Columbia: Washington, DC
Fort Lauderdale College: Fort Lauderdale, FL
Franklin University: Columbus, OH
Goddard College: Plainfield, VT
University of Guam: Mangilao, Guam
Hampshire College: Amherst, MA
Hawaii Pacific College: Honolulu, HI
Johnson State College: Johnson, VT
Long Island University - Brooklyn Campus: Brooklyn, NY
Middlebury College: Middlebury, VT
Morris College: Sumter, SC
Roger Williams College: Bristol, RI
St. John's College - New Mexico Campus: Santa Fe, NM
Shaw University: Raleigh, NC
Sierra Nevada College: Incline Village, NV
Stillman College: Tuscaloosa, AL
Southern Vermont College: Bennington, VT
Strayer College: Washington, DC
Tarkio College: Tarkio, MO
Union College: Schenectady, NY
Unity College: Unity, ME
Washburn University: Topeka, KS
Westbrook College: Portland, ME
Wright State University: Dayton, OH

GRADUATE INSTITUTIONS

Harvard Business School (GMAT): Boston, MA
Johns Hopkins University/School of Medicine (MCAT): Baltimore, MD

APPENDIX B

IS THE SAT BIASED?

The following items are from recent Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs) disclosed under New York's Truth-in-Testing law. They represent just a small percentage of SAT items which discriminate against students who are not familiar with the activities and vocabulary of upper-middle class Americans.

1. RACQUET:TENNIS::
(A) springboard:diver
(B) horse:polo
(C) glove:boxing
(D) club:golf
(E) gun:hunting

2. HEIRLOOM:INHERITANCE::
(A) payment:currency
(B) belongings:receipt
(C) land:construction
(D) legacy:bill
(E) booty:plunder

3. CONSERVATORY:MUSIC::
(A) anthology:books
(B) aerie:birds
(C) bivouac:army
(D) seminary:religion
(E) arbor:grapes

4. SONATA:MUSICAL::
(A) epic:whimsical
(B) novel:literary
(C) song:humorous
(D) testimony:rhymed
(E) pantomime:vocal

5. MINUET:DANCE::
(A) beret:bowler
(B) clarinet:symphony
(C) chariot:wheel
(D) sonnet:poem
(E) gown:petticoat

6. PIROUETTE:DANCER::
(A) touchdown:referee
(B) motivation:coach
(C) somersault:acrobat
(D) model:sculptor
(E) rink:skater

7. MELODEON:ORGANIST::
(A) reveille:bugler
(B) solo:accompanist
(C) crescendo:pianist
(D) anthem:choirmaster
(E) kettledrum:tympanist

8. BRIDLE:HORSE::
(A) bone:dog
(B) olive branch:dove
(C) valor:soldier
(D) precept:conduct
(E) devotion:duty

Family Income	Average SAT
Over $50,000	998
$40,000 - $49,999	968
$30,000 - $39,999	947
$24,000 - $29,999	927
$18,000 - $23,999	900
$12,000 - $17,999	877
$ 6,000 - $11,999	824
Under $6,000	771

(from Ramist and Arbeiter, Profiles, College Bound Seniors, 1983, p.7)

-- ETS ON TEST BIAS --

In 1970, ETS reacted to charges that their tests were biased by adding one "minority-oriented" reading passage to the SAT. In 1974 Stephen Brill, writing for "New York Magazine", asked ETS senior executive Marion Epstein about why ETS added these new passages:

Brill: If the tests weren't culturally biased in the first place, why did you make the change?

ETS: Because minorities feel at ease reading this kind of passage.

Brill: If they feel at ease reading this one, does that mean they don't feel at ease reading the six or seven others in the text?

ETS: No. It just means they feel more comfortable with this one.

Brill: Well, if they feel more comfortable with this one, does that mean their scores will be higher?

ETS: No, I don't think there will be any difference in "scores."

Brill: Well, if there won't be any difference in scores, why would you make the change? Was it just so you could look like you were doing something?

ETS: No, it's because when people are more comfortable, they'll do better on the test. They feel less threatened.

(from David Owen, None of the Above, Houghton-Mifflin, 1985)

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